



# **7 Habits of Super Happy Couples**

**MORE LOVE • LESS CONFLICT!**

**Drs. Kevin & Jackie Freiberg**

**Authors of the World-Wide Bestseller, NUTS! Southwest Airlines' Crazy  
Recipe for Business and Personal Success and CAUSE: A Business Strategy  
for Standing Out in a Sea of Sameness**



## OVERVIEW

Falling in love is a gift, but most happy couples will tell you that staying in love over the long haul takes work. It requires resolve. That's because self-giving, other-centered love is more than a feeling; it's a gutsy, visceral decision of the will. And, each time you choose it, love has the potential to grow and mature.

The same can be said for finding meaning and fulfillment in a relationship. Meaning doesn't just happen. It's not something you find by taking a guru journey to the base of the Himalayas. Most people who take a year off and do that usually come home disappointed. You make meaning.

Meaning is something you create...

together. And it is created only in the context of commitment.

Show us someone who isn't committed to anyone or anything, and we will show you someone who struggles with meaning and significance. Your life has meaning to the degree that you are committed to something or someone beyond yourself. In a relationship, that is your partner.

So, what can we learn from happy couples who are deeply connected? Couples who have built a life of meaning and significance together? Couples who have found joy, regardless of their circumstances?

**Here are seven habits to borrow from:**

A romantic silhouette of a man and a woman embracing against a warm, orange sunset background. The man is on the left, looking up at the woman on the right, who has her arms around his neck. The scene is captured in high contrast, with the subjects appearing as dark shapes against the bright, glowing sky.

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# 1

## CHOOSE TO FIGHT

Sounds paradoxical or counterintuitive, doesn't it. The fact is, marriage and relationships are hard. Put two people with different backgrounds and upbringing, different perspectives, and different genders under the same roof for a long time, and you are bound to have friction. Add to this the decisions that come with demanding jobs, caring for children and parents, the anxiety of a less civilized world, and you have a perfect storm.

Happy couples make their relationships a priority and then fight for them. When the going gets tough, and it will, they don't tuck tail and run or seek greener pastures. They don't check out because it's hard. They stay in it and fight for each other even while they are fighting with each other.

Their commitments supersede their feelings. In the moment, they might feel like hitting the eject button, but they don't because quitting is not an option. Unless, of course, the relationship involves some type of intolerable abuse.

Quitting reinforces a pattern of quitting. It creates a negative compound effect that throws their lives into a downward spiral. Happy couples know that every time they fight for what they've committed to, they put another weld on the bar of resilience. Every time they step through their quitting points, they create a positive compound effect that strengthens their relationships.

Couples who struggle often trade being happy for being right. But being right is highly overrated. We know this from experience. We've screwed up more good weekends with each other because one of us had to prove we were right. In the end, it was a waste of time and drained the emotional bank account.

We've learned that when one of us works hard to prove we are right at the expense of the other's dignity and happiness, it makes us unhappy as well. If we feel like we won and the other feels like they've lost, resentment will likely linger. When one of us loses, we both lose.

In a relationship, you have to get some perspective. Perspective enables you to pick and choose your battles more carefully. Is being right really worth the ego boost you get, even though you are alone and miserable? Is there really a return on investment?

When there's conflict, happy couples make a shift. The shift is from being right to understanding. That is, they spend less time arguing or proving their point and more time devoted to understanding how and why they and their partner got to a point of conflict in the first place.

When you both genuinely feel understood, you find a basis for moving forward. Understanding each other better creates the potential for empathy. Empathy often opens the door for patience, generosity, increased tolerance, and grace, all of which are crucial to your long-term joy and happiness.



Making the shift from being right to understanding, happy couples mine the story behind the story.

Imagine you are in a heated conflict with your spouse over money. She's frugal and conservative. You like to spend. You've worked it out until she inherited a large sum of money. Now, she wants to create six months of a financial safety net. You want to take that trip you both have been dreaming about but couldn't afford.

In your mind, you think she's a penny-pincher, tightwad, and scrooge. In her mind, you are an irresponsible, free-wheeling, over-spender. She thinks your behavior threatens your financial security. You think she's a killjoy who doesn't want to take a risk and live life.

**You each react to the stories you are telling yourselves, and things blow up.**

As we've said, for happy couples, the goal is never to win; it's to understand. It's to dig deeper by asking open-ended questions that take you both to the story behind the story. It's asking some version of, "Tell me why you feel the way you do about this?"

Assume that you both do a great job of probing and listening. You learn that her family never had money until later in life. When her mom and dad started to make money, they became savers because they never wanted to revisit living paycheck to paycheck. Furthermore, her father instilled a fear in her by frequently asking, "If you both lose your jobs, what's your Plan B? How much of a nest egg do you have?"

In digging deeper, she learns that you grew up in a family that over-promised and under-delivered in terms of doing epic things together. There was always talk about going to Yellowstone, Disney World, or skiing, but it never materialized after your father died and your hopes shattered.

**Everyone has a backstory.**



**Both of you have a story behind the story.**

You can react to the “surface” emotions and behaviors your partner displays when you fight, or you can unpack the story behind the story to understand what's driving those choices, emotions and behaviors. Successful couples find a way to get to the back story by suspending judgment, listening actively, and genuinely seeking to understand.

Couples who suspect that there is a story behind the story and truly work to understand it when they are at odds with each other have more empathy and more patience. They are more willing to come to some middle ground. They resolve conflict faster and find creative ways to meet each other's needs.

**This is why they can go the distance.**

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Surface emotions

Story behind the story

Self-giving, other-centered love takes you into the realm of uncertainty and vulnerability big time. Will the love I give be reciprocated? Will I be accepted and celebrated for who I am? Will my heart be handled thoughtfully? You will never know unless you drop your guard and step into the unknown.

And then, there is the past that haunts us. Truth be told, we are all wounded, and we carry the residue from our emotional wounds into our relationships. Our wounds come from many places: abandonment or neglect, not being picked, emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual abuse, directly or indirectly being told we were not enough, heartbreak, financial failures, and death just to name a few.

To self-protect, to prevent ourselves from experiencing the trauma and shame (realized or not) of being wounded, we all armor up. Our armor takes the form of being: perfectionists, performance and/or affirmation addicts, people-pleasers, control freaks, and arrogant know-it-alls, just to name a few.

Sometimes the armor we wear is being dismissive, judgmental, sarcastic, indifferent, promiscuous, independent or overly dependent, reclusive or even using humor to hide what's broken inside.

Let's face it, there is nothing more frightening and vulnerable than letting someone into your wounds, those dark places where you feel shame, where you feel undesirable. Happy couples are courageous. They are willing to set their shields aside and be vulnerable with each other, knowing that vulnerability is


absolutely essential to being deeply connected.

We are as sick as our secrets, and our secrets have a way of sabotaging our relationships, right? Successful couples encourage vulnerability and meet it with acceptance. They make it safe for each other to be authentic, raw and exposed. In those moments of naked honesty and fragility, where we own up to our woundedness, God begins to heal and transform the broken parts of our souls, making us whole. If we let them, our partners are often instrumental in the journey of healing and recovery.

In the process, our mutual vulnerability makes way for deeper understanding, empathy, and forgiveness. This is the birthplace of true intimacy. This is the stuff that real, unconditional love is made of.







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When you first fall in love, you have a heightened awareness, a super sensitivity that makes you pay attention to the little things. Then, as time goes on, it's easy to suspend doing the little things that demonstrate and say, "You are the most important person in my world. I love you."

So, what are the little things? Here are three little "not so little" things that can make a huge difference in your relationship:

**Bids for attention.** If you had to put a number on it, how often do you feel like your partner really listens or pays attention to you? It's an important question because responding positively, negatively, or indifferently can have a powerful cumulative effect on your relationship.

Relationship experts, John and Julie Gottman, found that successful couples turned towards each other's bids for attention 85 percent of the time while separated couples responded to each other only one-third of the time.

So, what are bids for attention? Well, they can be direct and quite obvious, or they can be indirect and very subtle. Here are a few examples:

- **Inquiring** ("How does this dress look?" "How was your day at work?")
- **A benign request** ("Would you please pour me a glass of wine while you're up?")
- **A deep sigh** (Often means "Please ask me what I'm thinking about.")
- **A simple observation** ("I thought \_\_\_ was delightful at dinner tonight.")

- **Physical Touch** (reach for the hand, hand on the knee, caress of the face, hug, pat on the butt)
- **Expressing emotions** (Openings to talk about emotions or experiences ("I got my ass kicked at the gym today." "Work was a grind this week."))



Every time you respond or turn toward your partner's bid for attention, you make a deposit in their emotional bank account. Every time you fail to respond, you take a withdrawal. The more deposits you make, the more trust and commitment you breed in your relationship. Trust and commitment are foundational to true intimacy and deep connection. So, pay attention to the little things.

**Repair attempts.** These are the secret weapons happy couples use to get unstuck. They determine whether a relationship is likely to thrive or crash. A repair attempt is any statement or action—verbal or physical, silly or serious, or otherwise—meant to diffuse negativity and de-escalate conflict. Examples of repair attempts include:

- **“I’m Sorry” statements:** (My reaction was too extreme, I’m sorry.” “I can see my role in all of this, I’m sorry.” “Can I start over, this time in a softer way?”)
- **“Get to Yes” statements:** (I think I see your point, tell me more.” “What if we found a compromise here?” “In the big picture, this really isn’t that important.”)
- **“I Need to Calm Down” statements:** (“I don’t want to say something I don’t mean. Can we take a break?” “Could we change the subject just for now?”)
- **“Self-effacing” statements:** (“I’m guessing that comment isn’t going to win me partner of the year.” “Sometimes I just need to engage my brain before my mouth, huh?”)
- **Physical Touch:** (Leaning in for a kiss, a hug, or holding a hand.)
- **Silly Action:** (a quirky smile, an endearing mimic, a joke)

Conflict is inevitable in every authentic relationship. Repair attempts are like hitting

the reset button. They give you a chance to breathe. To start again. The disagreement may not be over, but the hostility, aggression, and rage de-escalate even though the conflict remains.

**Words of gratitude and affirmation.** Think of the hundreds of things your partner does for you, your family, and your relationship—things you've possibly taken for granted over time. Think of the qualities or attributes you admire and respect in your partner. Happy couples find daily ways to say something like:


- “Thank for...”
- “I love the way you....”
- “You look \_\_\_ right now.”
- “I cherish you because....”

Don't be like the guy who said, "I told my wife that I loved her when we got married. Then, I told her that if I ever changed my mind, I'd let her know." If you've been with someone for a long time, it's easy to take them for granted. Remind them about how much you appreciate them every...single... day. Do not assume they know.

Here's the thing. If you are too busy or too distracted, it's easy to miss your partner's **bids for attention**. They often come in “little” ways. But the cumulative effect of turning toward your partner over and over again can transform your relationship.

Pay attention to the sometimes subtle ways your partner **attempts to repair**. In the heat of anger, this isn't easy. You may miss it. But if you are looking for it, a repair attempt becomes more noticeable. Avoiding conflict is NOT the key to a happy relationship. Learning to meaningfully face and quickly resolve the conflict is far more beneficial.

Finally, imagine what might happen if you found new ways to express your **gratitude and admiration** for your spouse every day.

A close-up photograph of a hand gripping a black-handled wrench. The wrench's head is made of worn, dark metal. The background is a plain, light color with several large, solid yellow circles scattered around. The overall composition is clean and modern.

**REPAIR ATTEMPTS** are  
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Here's a love hack for happy couples. Get off social media and stop comparing. Watch the romantic comedies but realize it's fantasy. They are perfectly scripted plots that aren't real. And, stop comparing.

Your diet will determine your perspective about your relationship. If you're digitally addicted and feed on a steady regimen of social media, you will eventually start wondering, "Why don't we have the relationship that they do?"

Well, guess what? On social media, most people are their own personal PR firm. They pose and put out the image they want you to see. When was the last time you saw a post that described someone's broken marriage? Someone depressed? Lonely? It rarely ever happens.

When you lift the hood or look behind the curtain, you discover posts are not reality. So, put down the phone, stop thinking that if you had your friend's relationship, you'd be so much happier, and ditch the envy trolling.

**Here's a guarantee.** If you take the time to unplug from social media and TV and instead use it to apply the habits outlined here, you will have a much better shot at having what happy couples have—a romantic comedy of your own.





**COMPARISON  
is the thief of joy.**

Most of us want to be loved and accepted the way we are, but we don't want to stay the way we are. We want to change, adapt and grow. We want to become better versions of ourselves.

**Acceptance.** Partners in a happy relationship accept each other's flaws—period. They love unconditionally. That is, they love their partner for who they are, not for their potential or for who they want them to become.

No one wants to be manipulated or controlled. No one wants to feel as though they are not enough. Being known and loved for who you are sets you free to be more than you have become.

**Change.** Happy couples make the shift from "I want to change you" to "I need to change me" and "let's change together." It is such a natural impulse to wish your partner was different and attempt to change them. How's that workin' for you?

Most women enter a lifelong relationship thinking they can change their man. They hope to tame the wild-at-heart. Most men commit to a lifetime hoping their women will never change. After many years, they expect them to be the curvaceous, sun-tanned goddesses they fell in love with. In either case, the unmet expectations cause the kind of frustration, discouragement, and despair that divide two people.

Letting go of control is a way of surrendering. It's scary. It makes you vulnerable. But then, control is an illusion. The only control you have is how you respond to people and circumstances you can not control.

Partners in a happy relationship work at becoming self-aware. They seek to find out how they land on their spouses. They ask

how their style of relating has impacted their partners over the long haul, and then, they listen (with no rebuttal) to learn, to be influenced.

When this happens, happy partners don't let the other person stop trying to improve. They jump in with both feet to encourage, equip and empower.





### **At the end of the day...**

...your relationship is either growing and maturing or on auto-pilot and flatlining. If it's on auto-pilot, it's also in atrophy. The tell-tale signs will be routine and resignation and then indifference or elevated conflict. Emotional distance will creep in on you. Then, you will wake up one day and ask yourself, "How'd we get this way?"

The point is, happy couples know that a successful relationship isn't one thing; it's a thousand little things that, when managed and worked on every day, cause a relationship to flourish.